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ABSTRACT

To supplement its French faculty, the Department of Modern Languages at Central Missouri State University (CMSU) has hired foreign students through the Institute of International Education (IIE), a clearinghouse for French and German university students wishing to teach in the United States. During the 1983-1984 academic year some 35 institutions participated in the IIE program. The participating institution responds to a questionnaire confirming its interest and outlining its needs and resources, and the clearinghouse sends a set of student dossiers for consideration, along with a letter specifying the terms of award upon selection. The candidates vary in background, but usually they have passed standardized examinations abroad. Some take courses while teaching in this country. For most, this is their first stay in the United States, and it has been found that providing a comfortable living arrangement and anticipating potential problems such as homesickness, bank transfer delays, and interpersonal difficulties are helpful. CMSU provides an introductory program orienting the new teaching assistants to the local students' characteristics and interests, the courses offered, and the department's instructional philosophy and techniques, and follows it up with periodic meetings. Classroom observation and student evaluation of the assistants take place; the assistants also evaluate the supervisory program. Despite some drawbacks, the program has been found valuable. (MSE)

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The French Language Teaching Assistant Program: Pedagogical Techniques and Administrative Problems

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The Department of Modern Languages at Central Missouri State University is typical of language departments at many regional state universities. Though the staff is small, most faculty members have a terminal degree. Historically, the department has provided many service courses. Majors and minors often combine their language study with a sequence in business or prepare a teaching certificate. No graduate training is offered. However, the department conducts its own summer study programs in France and Mexico.

Enrollments in the department have not only held steady, but have shown some increases in recent years. Financial exigencies of the university have precluded the hiring of additional regular staff. In order to supplement the staff, the French section of the department has turned to the teaching assistant program administered by the Institute of International Education (IIE).

Selection of the Proper Candidate

IIE is located in New York at the United Nations Plaza.[1] Working under a grant from the U.S. Information Agency, it serves as a clearinghouse for dossiers from French and West German university students who wish to teach in the U.S. The French Ministry of Education, the West

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German Pedagogical Exchange Service of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, and the West German Fulbright Commission work in cooperation with IIE.

During the 1983-84 academic year approximately thirty-five institutions participated in the IIE program. After initial contact, the host university receives an award information sheet. This questionnaire serves to confirm the institution's interest in the program and to give IIE a clear idea of the needs and resources of the department. In early March six to eight dossiers are sent to the host department. The candidates have been ranked by officials in their home country in terms of level of study and faculty evaluation of their work. If none of the candidates seems appropriate, additional dossiers may be requested. After receiving notification of the candidate selected, IIE contacts the candidate by letter and often also by telex. This letter specifies the terms of the award (teaching duties, salary, etc.), and requires acceptance or rejection of the award within one week of receipt. If the candidate declines, the institution's second choice is contacted. Once the process is finalized, IIE bills the host school $100 per candidate placed.

The candidates who apply for teaching assistantships vary in background, however they normally have a *D.e.u.g.* or *Erstes Staatsexamen*. Some students will have additional university training. However, based on our experience with the French candidates, this is not the norm. The exact duties of the assistant vary depending on the university. Most often, the assistant teaches several courses, participates in departmental support activities, and may enroll in a class or two.

Selection of the most appropriate candidate depends primarily on the anticipated use of the assistant's skills. If the assistant will be placed in charge of several classes, it is obviously best to find someone with previous teaching experience. We have found that most of the French assistants have spent one year in the United Kingdom at a secondary school. While these posts are normally that of teacher's aid, they still provide initial contact with the classroom situation.

Some of the assistants also indicate that they have special abilities. These may include the knowledge of other languages, musical talent, an interest in dramatics, etc. Skills of this nature might be of particular interest given the goals and needs of the department.

Acclimating the New Teaching Assistant

For the majority of the foreign teaching assistants, the IIE assignment is their first experience in the United States or at least their first stay of any significant length. If they are coming to a small college town in a rural setting, as is the case of CMSU, the degree of culture shock is staggering. We try to arrange for our assistants to stay in a graduate dormitory for the first term rather than making off-campus arrangements. Most international students also live in the graduate dorm, thereby giving our assistants a chance to make friends with the other foreign students as well as Americans. With the dormitory as a base, assistants gradually become aware of the varying aspects of campus life. They have the option of remaining all year or leaving after the first semester. We feel it is very important to provide a comfortable living arrangement for our teaching assistants because an unhappy assistant is bound to reflect this discontent in class. As part of the "moving in" process we also give short tours of the campus and the city.

As one might anticipate, the most common problem is homesickness. The fact that we have two assistants alleviates this problem somewhat. We try to provide some "at home" atmosphere by means of French club trips, French movies and restaurants. Though these activities may seem minor, they do have a positive effect on the teaching assistants' attitudes.

Other problems can range from bank transfers which never arrive, to two assistants' incompatibility. Anything can happen. Since our department is small, our teaching assistants look at the coordinators as not simply supervisors, but colleagues to call upon for resolving any problem which might develop.

Techniques of Training and Supervision

The most important task of the teaching assistant supervisor is to ensure competent instruction in the courses. At CMSU supervisory duties are shared by two members of the regular French staff. Since the department is small, supervision can be done on an informal basis.

We begin our training program with an introductory session of about three hours.[4] One of our first goals is to provide a profile of the typical CMSU student. At CMSU one finds a situation which is quite common at

schools other than large land-grant research institutions and well-endowed private liberal arts colleges. That is, students usually have shown only average ability in high school and seldom have experience in studying a foreign language. The foreign language teaching assistant often finds it hard to imagine students who have reached the university level with little or no foreign language training. Clarification is needed to equate the freshman year with the proper level in the French school system. The teaching assistant quite often incorrectly views the freshman year as equivalent to the first year of the *D.e.u.g.*

We next turn our attention to the specifics, reviewing the different courses offered and describing the goals and philosophy of our program. We have experimented with assigning various courses to the assistants. They seem to do best in the first introductory course and the advanced conversation classes. The first beginning class does not cause the assistant to wonder what the student already knows. We warn them not to judge the class by the performance of the *faux-débutants*. On the other hand, the advanced conversation class is composed of a motivated group of majors and minors, and offers unlimited possibilities for creative teaching strategies.

We give our assistants specific instructions and guidelines for each of the courses they will be teaching. Here are some general suggestions we make regarding the basic introductory courses.

Too often the assistant feels that if all eyes and ears are not fixed on the teacher, learning is not taking place. A major effort is made to change the orientation of the assistant from teacher-centered to student-centered activities, and this is a radical idea for most assistants we have employed. We offer a number of communication-oriented activity options such as small group work and personalized questions. The reaction of the assistants range from true enthusiasm to a polite smile and nod. In an effort to maintain a cordial supervisor/teaching assistant relationship, these techniques are simply suggested. However, if they are repeatedly ignored, a detailed lesson plan is distributed and the teaching assistant is required to use these techniques. In such a situation we feel that the class benefits from exposure to these other methods, though the assistant rarely becomes convinced of their effectiveness.

During our orientation sessions, we also review the content of the first several lessons of the text. Currently, we use Harris-Lévéque, *Basic*

Conversational French. We explain how to introduce and drill a dialogue, conduct pattern drills, present new vocabulary in the pattern drill, and give attention to the way grammatical concepts should be introduced. The linguistic preparation of our students is often weak, so some consideration of aspects of English grammar is needed before the problem of French grammatical concepts may be tackled.

Assistants often have a difficult time establishing a proper pace in the course. They seem equally divided between working too quickly and not fast enough. Therefore, we provide a day-by-day syllabus for the first time they teach the introductory material.

At CMSU there is no general foreign language requirement for graduation. A student may use one three-credit language course as part of the general studies requirements. There are also a very small number of programs requiring foreign language training. Thus, our enrollments are dependent on student perception of the quality and value of teaching in our department. Second and third courses are particularly crucial. Students taking these classes are usually interested in the language, and can often be encouraged to complete a minor if they have had positive experiences. For this reason, we have avoided giving our teaching assistants second- or third-semester courses the first term they are employed, while their ability to establish a positive classroom atmosphere has yet to be tested.

As important as the pre-session orientation meetings are, the subsequent meetings are equally important. It is imperative that the assistant feel that the meeting is productive and not just routine. We normally prepare an agenda several days in advance and ask the teaching assistants if they wish to add any items.

A general staff meeting is held every three or four weeks. Again, the small size of our department enables us to have relatively few such meetings, for many items can be discussed in the course of informal contact.

At the staff meetings we review the chapters coming up in the next few weeks and point out the difficulties students may experience. We also continue to stress the need for variety in classroom activities and teaching techniques. We review original handouts prepared by the assistants, discuss the success of these items in class, and suggest modifications. After a few weeks, small quizzes such as *dictées* are written by the teaching assistants without supervision. The coordinators continue to preview

unit tests until they feel that the teaching assistant understands how to compose and balance an exam. Some master this after writing two or three exams—others, unfortunately, never learn. Results of the most recent exams are discussed, as are the problems which might have arisen during administration of the exam.

Both classroom observations and student evaluations are an important part of the training process. We generally do two observations. The first observation is done after approximately eight classes, and is announced. For the second observation, we simply tell the teaching assistant about two-thirds of the way through the term that an observation will be made within the next several days. We follow rather standard categories for the basis of these observations, such as: teacher-dominated vs. student-dominated activities, interest level, variety of activities, teacher "bearing" in the classroom, involvement of the entire class in activities, use of methods suggested at the staff meetings. Prior to the observation we distribute a form to our assistants which shows the basis on which their class will be evaluated. We also try to have a follow-up conversation the same day as the observation.

Student evaluation forms are distributed at the end of the term and held until grades have been submitted. The teaching assistant reviews the forms privately and then a conference is held with the supervisors. We ask the teaching assistant what comments on the evaluations were surprising, and use these comments as a point of departure for discussion of the assistant's work. Some of the negative comments can be discounted as simply the students' need to release normal frustration. If there is an abnormally high number of negative comments, we discuss this with the teaching assistant, while still trying to emphasize the positive aspects.

During the spring term, the use of classroom observation varies, depending on the teaching assistant's previous performance. In most cases, spring term guidance is limited to staff meetings, informal discussions, and student evaluations.

At the end of the year we also ask the assistants to complete a written evaluation of the supervisory program. We request their opinion of the training sessions, staff meetings, and extent of supervision. But we try to make clear early in the year that we are always open to any suggestions the assistants might have about the program.

Conclusion

As with any teaching technique or methodology, the teaching assistant program at CMSU has experienced both successes and failures. Most important, the program has provided an opportunity for the department to utilize native speakers as instructors during a time in which even adjunct faculty are hired sparingly. The youth and energy of the assistants is certainly another advantage, particularly in the organization of extracurricular activities.

There have been drawbacks to the program. Some teaching assistants fail to understand the importance of arriving in class on time or consistently ignore university regulations regarding the times reserved for final exams. In addition, there may be scepticism regarding suggested teaching techniques. Most of them have learned English under the grammar translation method and thus may scoff at other techniques. On occasion, the assistants mistakenly feel that as native speakers they are automatically good teachers.

What is the final *bilan?* The values of the program certainly outweigh the drawbacks. Clearly, it is best to be able to staff courses with a full-time experienced faculty composed of both native and non-native speakers. However, in those situations where this is impossible, the use of the native speaker teaching assistants is a viable option.

Notes

1. Some of the background material concerning IIE is summarized from the brochure entitled "Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program" published by the Institute of International Education, obtained by writing to IIE, Office of English and Special Services, 809 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017.
2. The following list includes some of the recent literature on the training and supervision of teaching assistants.

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